

An Interview with Celia Mae Bryant

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Article:

Celia Mae Bryant has had a distinguished association with MTNA. From 1965 to 1969 she served two terms as National Vice President of States and Divisions, and from 1969 to 1973 she became the first woman to assume the Presidency of MTNA since its founding in 1876. In addition, she has served the field of piano pedagogy with great distinction. Now retired from the University of Oklahoma where she was Professor of Piano for thirty-two years, she remains active in the music profession at the state and national levels and is also in demand as a leader in civic organizations in her hometown of Norman, Oklahoma.

Listed in all major Who's Who publications, Mrs. Bryant has lectured through-out the country on all aspects of piano teaching. Among her many other activities, she taught at the Interlochen Center for the Arts in the summers of 1972 and 1973, and in the following two years she headed the first Delegations of Professional Musicians to the USSR and East European countries under the auspices of the U.S. People-to-People Program. In 1973 she received the Outstanding Musician in Oklahoma Award in recognition of the excellence of her work.

Her views of piano pedagogy in the university curriculum, an area in which she speaks with a richly-earned conviction, were recorded in an interview conducted at her Norman home.

Question: If budgetary factors were not a constraint, and if you were un-fettered by any departmental guidelines, how would you structure a university piano pedagogy curriculum?

Most important, a pedagogy program must allow students the opportunity to teach children at all levels, from beginning level on up, all under supervision. One can acquire all the knowledge in the world about pedagogy, but without the actual experience in teaching, there is no real professional growth. Also, psychology is such a very important part of teaching that a basic course should be included in that area. It is necessary to understand students and to recognize individual differences in order to maximize pedagogical effectiveness. Teachers must be able to establish a rapport with each student which will result in piano study that is enjoyable and pleasurable, becoming an effective motivation for desired results.

A business course would be most advantageous. Private teachers are seldom prepared to handle the financial arrangements of their business. A well-rounded pedagogy curriculum should include a speech course. The ability to speak in public is essential for success. Throughout my career, I have been called upon frequently to lecture. One unforgettable occasion was an address I gave before the Washington Press Club. If anyone had ever told me I would be standing before 500 people, all musicians and critics, I would never have believed them. Fortunately, by that time I had had a considerable amount of experience speaking before groups. Pedagogy students would do well to acquire some of that experience while still in school, working on improving the speaking voice, stage presence—learning to be at ease and confident. If a teacher is going to be successful, he has to make his views known through communicating at public appearances. One must be trained not only as a performer but also as a speaker. I always urged my college students to take a course in speech.

Finally, I think students should be encouraged to read as much as possible on any subject that interests them,

though such a luxury may have to wait until the completion of formal study. Most musicians are very knowledgeable on many subjects.

Question: Do you believe that a pedagogy degree should include at least a survey course of all the basic leading technic approaches in order to present an overview of the different systems?

Yes, a basic understanding of various approaches to technic will affect students' performances as they relate to style. For instance, some students use the same technic that is appropriate for Bach in all their playing, which proves to be inadequate as applied to later periods involving Romantic and Impressionist music. Leschetitzky, Philipp, and Matthay each stressed a certain system due to the needs of his time. For example, Philipp focused on individual finger dexterity. Personally, I feel very fortunate to have been exposed to several different techniques. I studied with two of Philipp's students and also with Frank Mannheimer, Matthay's assistant. Technic was always very easy for me, but my fine training was an asset in understanding the technical analysis necessary to resolve the students' problems. Pedagogy students need exposure to the various approaches in order to arm themselves with as much insight as possible. I believe that my own effectiveness as a teacher would have been greatly diminished if I had known only the Philipp approach, for instance.

Question: Do the studio teachers feel that the pedagogy teacher is encroaching on their territory by discussing technical approaches and alternatives?

Oh no! They are eager to learn more. In workshops, one of the most well-received topics is what I call the "tricks of the trade," which includes a list of essential technic considerations. Fine teachers are constantly seeking more information. I have no patience with teachers who have the attitude that technic is a matter with which they can't be bothered. Their students are getting shortchanged, and the teacher's only excuse is laziness, ignorance, or both. Teaching is more than just saying, "a little softer here or a little louder there."

Question: How should the emphases on performance and pedagogy be balanced in the ideal piano pedagogy curriculum?

I feel that one performance should be required of all pedagogy students as proof that they know how to handle the material, but I don't think they should be judged on the basis that they are going to go out and become concert artists. Even if a person were a performer before he started teaching, the performance emphasis gets pushed aside because of the heavy teaching schedule. For instance, when I was writing for Clavier, teaching at the University of Oklahoma, serving as a national officer for MTNA, and lecturing throughout the country, I had to forego a great deal of my performing opportunities. This is especially true for anyone who teaches pedagogy in a university; it is most desirable for one to write and publish in order to bring recognition to the university. These activities also are invaluable in recruiting efforts. However, teachers must maintain their performing abilities to a high level in order to demonstrate technical examples. One can talk and explain, but nothing replaces actual demonstration. Of course, if you are working with advanced students, you have to be prepared to play difficult music, and it is always the most difficult places that are necessary to demonstrate! So a dedicated teacher never really gives up performance, but the pressures of frequent public appearances are not suited to the life of a fulltime teacher. The emphasis in piano-teaching preparation, then, should definitely be on pedagogy, with the stipulation that students prove their performance capabilities through one recital. Also, it is not uncommon at all for a pianist who is not a gifted performer to become a superb teacher. The teaching profession needs more piano teachers. There are also those people who are beautiful performers, but who would rather teach than perform. When I reduced my own performing commitments, I found that I loved my teaching more than ever. Before that, I had split my time and effort. Further, I do not believe that fine performers necessarily make good teachers. As I have said, technic for me was never a problem, but this natural ability did not automatically give the analytical understanding that a good teacher needs. Frank Mannheimer did that for me. He said that, "it is the teacher's responsibility to resolve all the student's problems." He meant technic, memory, etc. I thought that if there is truth in that, I would never let a student's failure be my fault. If you teach with that philosophy, you can't believe how creative your mind becomes. You keep thinking of different ways to resolve each problem, usually resulting in a technical solution. Teachers must devise numerous ways to attack every problem. They must also learn all of the terminology used in theory. It didn't take me long to learn this during my first year of college teaching. Transfer students from other schools can present real problems if

the teacher doesn't understand his terminology. There is so much to learn in teaching!

Question: Should university pedagogy curricula concentrate on a specific function, such as group piano, pre-school instruction, university-level pedagogy, etc., or should pedagogy training be more eclectic in encompassing all of these instructional areas?

I believe that all of these areas should be encompassed. I have found many students who never dreamed that they would like to teach young children, but once they had the opportunity to try their hand at it, they developed a real love for specific age levels. We do need more teachers who want to work with young students; it is so important to get them off to a good start. Likewise, there are teachers who prefer to teach older students. I have always enjoyed teaching university students, though I have been fascinated with opportunities to work with young students in a master lesson format where problems are being resolved, suggestions offered for better performances, etc. My point is that a teacher's interest and preference are the surest predictors of success. Explore all the possibilities, decide which area you like best and for which you have the ability, and specialize. Many young teachers have never had the opportunity to work with varying modes of instruction and often find the first few years of teaching very difficult. A piano pedagogy curriculum should definitely acquaint students with all instructional levels and procedures.

Question: Is piano teaching an art or a science—are there universal prescriptions and strategies that will improve teaching style, or is teacher effectiveness dependent on individual personalities?

Piano teaching is an art and the subject matter is a science. There is a universal approach that will help every teacher to become more effective, but I think that success also depends on personality. The most important traits are love of teaching and dedication, a combination that augurs well for success. I have never seen a teacher who is dedicated and loves to work with people who wasn't successful. If a teacher doesn't enjoy working with a certain age group, he will have numerous problems. Personally, I would be too impatient to teach young children, but I don't have that impatience at all with older students, assuming of course that they are practicing and taking their study seriously. The secret to success is to find that area of teaching which one finds most rewarding and specialize in that particular age group.

Question: What advice would you give to students aspiring to become piano teachers?

If you really want teaching to be your professional goal, then you must give it everything you have and you will succeed. You must prepare as thoroughly as possible during your student days in both performance and pedagogy courses. Your career will involve either performing or teaching or both. In college teaching, the emphasis is usually on both. If you do not want to perform that much, you can become a private teacher, which I think would be a marvelous occupation. I have always told my students to think of private teaching as a most successful business; set up a school of music where you will have teachers under you receiving a percentage from their lessons. You will have an excellent income. Parents are always willing to pay for quality. The running of a private studio is one reason I think pedagogy students should have a course in business. The best preparation, then, is broadbased. Pedagogy students must give their best effort in all of their studies, then the future will take care of itself. If you skip over one, it's like removing some of the bricks from a foundation—it's going to break down. One must build a solid foundation. You must have theory, analysis, technic, sightreading, everything. Every element is important.